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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL

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TAGS: PHUM SOCI PGOV PREL KIRF VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: LOCAL PROTESTANTS TAKE CAUTIOUS APPROACH TO MENNONITE PASTOR'S ARREST

REF: A) HCMC 0789 B) HCMC 0232 C) HCMC 0573 D) Hanoi 1268

1. (SBU) Summary: ConGen followed up with several local Protestant leaders on June 10, to obtain additional details on the June 8 detention of Mennonite pastor Nguyen Hong Quang (ref A) in HCMC. ConGen also obtained a copy of an official "announcement" of the arrest, which the District 2 police reportedly gave to Pastor Quang's on June 10. ConGen sources recognized the seriousness of the GVN's case against their colleague, and stressed the need to deal with the authorities in a measured way. At the same time, the HCMC Committee on Religious Affairs has apparently urged the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam to keep its distance from this case. End summary.

2. (SBU) One local Protestant contact said he and his wife had visited Pastor Quang's home on the evening of June 9 to comfort the family. They noted that police appeared to have removed Pastor Quang's computer and all paper documents, but had not ransacked or damaged the property. (Post Note: This latter statement runs contrary to a June 10 report published by "Compass Direct," which differs in tone and substance in its account of the arrest and events leading up to it. End note.) This same Protestant contact provided ConGen with what he claimed was the wife's account of the arrest. She reportedly told him that she, Pastor Quang and their three children were in their District 2 home on the afternoon of June 8, when one of their church workers telephoned from another piece of property they own 300 meters down the road to say that several land officials from the city were there to survey the property. When Pastor Quang went to meet with the officials, "approximately 100 police suddenly materialized" at both his house and the other property. Police immediately handcuffed and took Pastor Quang away without a struggle. Four church workers inside the building witnessed the incident, but did not have time to assist their leader. They said the arrest happened very quickly, and while police reportedly held a handgun to Pastor Quang's neck, they did not treat him violently. The four church workers were kept inside the building for several hours, while police searched the premises. They were able to use their cell phones to contact their associates, however.

3. (SBU) At the same time, the wife reportedly recounted to ConGen's source, police poured through several different doors of the pastor's primary residence. In fact, she found police already in the second floor office by the time she and several other church workers made it up the staircase. Police also secured the house next door, which Pastor Quang used for additional office space. Approximately 20 family and friends at the primary residence were kept inside for several hours while police searched, although at least one of them was able to contact a member of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF) leadership on his cell phone. When that VEF leader arrived about 30 minutes later, he thought Pastor Quang was still inside his house. As he approached the house, he reportedly received a telephone call from a contact in the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) advising him to leave. Upon contacting a higher level MPS officer, he was told that the arrest order had come down from "the highest authority," which the pastor assumed to mean the central government in Hanoi. This second MPS contact also told him that Pastor Quang's own associates had provided the information leading to the arrest, allegedly accusing Pastor Quang of inciting them to attack police on March 4 (ref B).

4. (SBU) According to this same ConGen source, Pastor Quang's wife was "invited" to the District 2 police station on the morning of June 10. She was not allowed to see her husband, but was asked to witness the opening of evidence bags she had signed for during the search on June 9. But since she herself did not know what was inside the evidence bags, Pastor Quang's wife told police she did not wish to witness their opening. She was released after several hours. Before she left, she was given a copy of a police report affirming her husband's temporary detention on charges of "inciting and encouraging others to obstruct officials in the furtherance of their duties." One of Pastor Quang's assistants, Pastor Nguyen Huu Hien appeared at the District 2 police station on June 11, two days after he was "invited" to speak with them. He was released from questioning after a few hours, despite others' fears that he would also be arrested.

5. (SBU) Another VEF leader told ConGen that Pastor Quang was arrested because the GVN was angry over information he had published regarding the March 4 incident and other topics on an

activist website, www.ykien.net ("y kien" means opinion in Vietnamese). This would put him in the category of a cyber-dissident, rather than a religious worker. The VEF leader said he believes a May letter from the Mennonite Church in the U.S. to the GVN regarding the March 4 incident was yet another aggravating factor. According to this VEF leader, the GVN was feeling "empowered by its success in deceiving" the international community over the true nature of recent ethnic demonstrations in the Central Highlands (refs C and D). He noted that police had visited three prominent house church services in HCMC the previous Sunday to question the pastors about their religious activities, something that almost never happens in this city. He worried that Pastor Quang's latest encounter with the law was extremely serious, and was based on a lengthy investigation. He said Pastor Quang's colleagues from the VEF planned to continue their discussions with contacts in MPS on June 11. (Post will report via septel.) He also noted that the VEF had decided three days before the June 8 arrest to draft a report to the GVN on the current state of the house church movement. The arrest would not affect those plans, although they would not address the Pastor Quang arrest in that document. The VEF knew that they needed to be careful in approaching this issue with the GVN. He did not think there would be any sort of organized protest at the police station.

16. (SBU) A separate Protestant contact reported to ConGen that the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the HCMC Religious Affairs Committee spent one hour at the offices of the government-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) on June 10 to advise them against getting involved in this matter. They "reminded" the Executive Board that Pastor Quang was not a member of the SECV, and that the Mennonites were not affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, the founding denomination of the SECV. They described the arrest as an appropriate response to Pastor Quang's opposition to the government, which was a criminal matter, not a religious one. On June 12, another Protestant contact called to say that he had heard the police had returned to Pastor Quang's house for a second search.

17. (SBU) Comment: Despite being directly asked, none of the Post's local contacts was willing to characterize Pastor Quang's arrest as some sort of larger GVN crackdown on Protestants, although there were hints that the lack of a coordinated international response to recent events in the Central Highlands might have emboldened the GVN. There appears to be a clear recognition among local Protestant leaders, however, that Pastor Quang is something of a special case. In their own minds, he may have crossed the line between purely religious work and controversial political activism in his bold confrontations with the GVN, and there are those Protestants who do not see their future as being out on that limb with him.
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